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The Soviet Fishing Fleet: An Expanding Global Presence

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An Intelligence Assessment

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GI 83-10089C

April 1983

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The Soviet Fishing Fleet: An Expanding Global Presence

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by [redacted]
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welcome and may be directed to the Chief,
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**The Soviet Fishing Fleet:
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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 1 March 1983
was used in this report.*

During the 1970s the deterioration of fisheries in northern oceans and the assertion of 200-nautical mile (nm) fishing and economic zone claims by coastal nations forced Soviet and other long-distance fishermen to seek new fish resources. The Soviet fishing fleet (approximately 4,500 vessels) expanded its presence southward and, in so doing, enhanced its potential for increased harvests, for more contacts with Third World countries through mutually beneficial bilateral fishing agreements, and for conducting missions in support of military and intelligence objectives.

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We believe that over the next decade Soviet fishermen, using their ever improving fishing technology as enticement, will continue to seek access to Third World 200-nm coastal zones with offers of fishery training programs and commercial joint fishing ventures. Such agreements afford the USSR not only additional fish protein for the Soviet diet but also intimate knowledge of foreign ports and coasts and legitimate access to foreign citizens, institutions, and economies.

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While many developing countries are reluctant to enter into agreements with the USSR, we believe that a large number will do so because they want to establish indigenous fishing industries and have no similar offers from the West. We also believe that once these nations feel competent to run these operations themselves, the desire for greater profit—and also feelings of national pride—will cause them to pull away from close Soviet ties by letting the agreements lapse.

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Soviet fishermen will, in our opinion, also increase their efforts in areas just outside national 200-nm fishing and economic zones and also in midocean. This repositioning of fishing activities, we believe, could lead to competition between US and Soviet long-distance tuna fishermen. It could also result in a spate of claims to fishery jurisdiction beyond the 200-nm limit, with attendant boundary and jurisdictional conflicts, by coastal nations seeking to halt what they see as Soviet poaching of their fish resources.

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This repositioning will also enhance the fishing fleet's potential as a valuable, in-place, and ostensibly innocent monitoring system.

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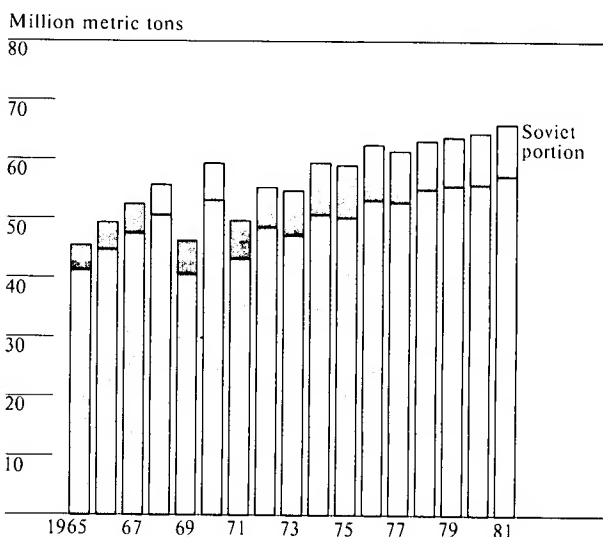
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Two events during the 1970s forced Soviet fishermen to make fundamental changes in their traditional fishing patterns and practices, changes that have expanded Soviet presence in Third World areas and have consequences for political and strategic planning in the United States and other Western nations. First came the near collapse of many of the popular fish stocks in northern waters that Soviet and other fishermen had relied upon, the result in large measure of uncontrolled fishing. Next, as a direct result of over-fishing, was the unilateral and near universal assumption of control by coastal nations over fish resources within 200 miles¹ of their shores. Both events forced Soviet and other long-distance fishermen to seek new fish resources and, most importantly with regard to the Soviet fishing fleet, new fishing grounds.

New Fishing Grounds and Fish Species

Elements of the Soviet fleet began appearing in the 1970s in areas where none had been observed before, and in greater numbers where only a few had been observed.

World Ocean Fish Catch, 1965-81



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the Soviet total before widespread imposition of 200-mile national coastal zones, produced 71 percent in 1981. The share of the grounds off New Zealand, South America, southern Africa, and Antarctica, just 6 percent of the Soviet total in 1974, rose to 24 percent in 1981. Popular whitefish species like the various cods, hakes, and flatfish from the northern fishing grounds, which made up about a third of the Soviet harvest in the early 1970s, accounted for just 5 percent in 1981. These have been largely replaced by capelin and blue whiting from the Norwegian Sea, which are processed mainly for fish meal; various mackerel species from off Peru, Chile, and southern

The global distribution and makeup of the Soviet fish catch reflects this shift in operating areas. The USSR's North Pacific and Atlantic fishing grounds, which regularly accounted for nearly 90 percent of

¹ All miles are nautical miles.

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Africa; Japanese pilchard, a sardine species from the northwest Pacific; and krill from Antarctica. Together these species constituted 37 percent of the Soviet catch in 1981. []

The primary function of the Soviet fishing fleet is fishing. Fish constitutes 15 percent of the 20 kilograms per year of animal protein in the Soviet diet, and Moscow included a 10 to 12 percent increase in edible fish products in the 1981-85 Five-Year Plan. The repositioning of the fleet southward, however, not so incidentally presents new opportunities for Third World contacts and operations supporting intelligence and military goals. []

Third World Contacts

The USSR, like other long-range fishing nations, has recognized the unilateral 200-mile claims. To gain access to these new maritime zones, the USSR is entering into a variety of bilateral fishery agreements. With neighboring Japan and Norway, the agreements are reciprocal in nature, allowing each party to fish for specific quotas in the other's zone. Under the agreements with Canada, New Zealand, and the United States, Soviet vessels must secure licenses to fish for assigned quotas, and they may also enter into joint ventures with local companies.² The USSR makes these same arrangements with Third World countries and also concludes agreements that feature development of local fishing industries. These agreements are usually for five years with provisions for review and modification during that time. Typically under these arrangements:

- The USSR agrees to:
 - Survey the local fish resources, using Soviet vessels and equipment, and share the findings with the host country.
 - Train local fishery experts and fishermen, in both the host country and the USSR.
 - Establish local fishery training centers.
 - Give or loan fishing vessels to the host country.
 - Construct onshore fish-processing and ship-servicing facilities.
 - Supply fish for joint ventures.

² The United States withdrew Soviet fishing quotas and New Zealand halved Soviet quotas in the aftermath of the invasion of Afghanistan. Soviet factory ships continue to operate in the US 200-mile zone, loading fish caught by US fishermen under the terms of a joint venture with a private company. []

- The USSR receives in return:
 - A share of the local fish resource.
 - Use of local port facilities for ship servicing and crew changes.
 - Landing privileges for Soviet aircraft to carry out crew exchanges, which are major operations because the crew complement of large trawlers is commonly 100 and of trawler-cannery, more than 200.
 - The right to establish a permanent Soviet fishery representative.
 - Housing for Soviet personnel. []

The benefits for the host country from these agreements vary. According to the press, Soviet fishermen in a joint venture agreement with Yemen (Aden) helped that country boost its catch from less than 20,000 tons in 1971, when the venture began, to more than 75,000 tons in 1980, and the present five-year plan calls for an increase to 195,000 tons by 1985. With Soviet training and ships, Iraqi fishermen have expanded their fishing grounds into the southeast Atlantic and have queried such distant countries as India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Malaysia about setting up joint fishing ventures. []

Some host countries have, however, expressed dissatisfaction with the agreements. Embassies report that Senegal complained that Soviet fishing equipment was hard to maintain. Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique grumbled about the inferior quality and quantity of fish they received from their Soviet partners. Mauritius accused Soviet fishermen of overfishing. Morocco said the Soviets tried to proselytize its young fisheries trainees. []

We believe that for the USSR these agreements have, on balance, been worth the investment. In addition to the fish harvest and port privileges, the USSR has gained a knowledge of the physical character of foreign coastal areas and ports, many of them adjacent to important straits and sea lanes, and legitimate access to foreign citizens, institutions, and economies; with crew exchange privileges, it has the opportunity to move agents into and out of countries easily; and its presence has been established in areas throughout the world. []

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Nonfishing Operations

With their sophisticated gear designed for sampling and analyzing the ocean environment, finding fish, and communicating, the fishing fleet's 4,500 vessels, particularly those outfitted for fishery research, could provide limited support for Soviet intelligence and military activities. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

While the fishing fleet as a whole may not have an explicit intelligence collection mission, individual ships undoubtedly report on targets of opportunity

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Some remained within the British 200-mile exclusionary zone around the Falklands until after the landing at San Carlos. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

The fleet's factory ships, tankers, and supply ships are capable of resupplying naval units, and trawlers could be modified to lay mines. The British demonstrated off the Falklands that trawlers can be used for minesweeping operations as well. Research submersibles carried on some fishery research vessels could be used for undersea surveillance activities. These submersibles are not, however, known to have been used in this manner. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Future Fishing Areas and Activities

Moscow's current five-year plan calls for an increased harvest from the USSR's 200-mile zone and from areas worldwide that lie beyond national coastal zones. This means a greater assault on Alaska pollack, already the largest component in the Soviet harvest for more than a decade (a quarter of the 1981 total), and Japanese pilchard from the Pacific Ocean and the Bering Sea. The Barents and Baltic coastal areas have no known comparable resource, but Soviet fishermen will search for unexploited species off both coasts and in the Pacific. [REDACTED]

We believe that Soviet fishing operations beyond 200-mile zones will focus on the midocean ridge system worldwide and on isolated seamounts of volcanic origin like those in the Emperor Seamount Chain, just north of the US 200-mile zone around Midway Island, and those immediately outside the US west coast 200-mile zone. The fragility of seamount fish stocks will necessitate a continuous global search for

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seamounts with exploitable fish stocks. [REDACTED]

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We also believe that Soviet fishermen will continue their operations just outside the South American, Canadian, Icelandic, and Mauritian 200-mile zones where coastal species straddle the 200-mile boundary and that they will search for other such areas. This could bring about a spate of unilateral extensions of fishing jurisdiction beyond present 200-mile boundaries by countries that view the Soviet activity as poaching fish that should be theirs. Canada and Argentina tried to insert such provisions into the new UN Law of the Sea Treaty during the latter phases of negotiation but were thwarted by the United States, the USSR, and other nations that wanted to keep national jurisdiction in the oceans to a minimum. [REDACTED]

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Soviet fishermen could also begin an exploratory fishery for the little-studied mesopelagic species—small, elusive fish that live at great depths independent of seamounts and continental shelves. Thought to have an annual yield potential of about 450 million tons, they are envisioned as an important source of fish meal and oil. Finding them is, at this point, a greater problem than processing them. [REDACTED]

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An order reported in the press for 20 modern tuna vessels from Polish shipyards indicates that Soviet fishermen will also begin to hunt tuna, the most important commercial species of the open ocean. These species, many of which accomplish transoceanic migrations, at present constitute only 0.1 percent of the Soviet catch. This fishery will be precarious, however, because the least exploited stocks, those around tropical Pacific and Indian Ocean islands, are encompassed by national 200-mile zones. Since the USSR has had little experience with modern tuna fishing, we believe the fishery will develop slowly. Moreover, Soviet fishermen will come into direct competition with US long-distance tuna fishermen, who now operate as far away as New Zealand and the Indian Ocean. [REDACTED]

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We believe the southern ocean, the waters surrounding Antarctica, will also receive a greater Soviet fishing effort, with the focus on krill. This resource,

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which scientists now estimate as capable of producing as much as three times the world's current annual ocean harvest of 65 million tons, is unprotected by quota regulations. Growth will continue until the krill is depleted or until the nations⁴ that have ratified the *Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources* develop effective conservation measures and an effective enforcement mechanism. [REDACTED]

Soviet fishing within foreign 200-mile zones will, in our judgment, increasingly take place under joint-venture arrangements. Many nations, particularly those from the Third World, want greater profits from their coastal fish stocks than just license and catch fees from foreign fishermen. Most now demand not only the establishment of joint ventures but also a controlling interest in them. In addition to the profits derived from selling the fish products domestically and abroad, joint ventures give these nations greater control over Soviet fishing off their coasts, as well as training to run their own fishing industries. We believe that once these nations feel competent to run fishing operations themselves, the desire for greater profit—and also feelings of national pride—will cause them to pull away from close Soviet ties by letting the agreements lapse. [REDACTED]

The Indian Ocean, which has been the backwater of Soviet fishing, is a likely area for new Soviet joint ventures. UN estimates indicate that the Indian Ocean is capable of producing about three times its current annual fish harvest of 3.5 million tons. These estimates further indicate that the approximately 40 countries of the Indian Ocean area, most of which are protein deficient, will require all of this expanded catch by the turn of the century. Many are desperately trying to upgrade their fishing industries to exploit this potential source of protein. [REDACTED]

In sum, we believe that the Soviet presence in the form of its fishing fleet will pervade the oceans, generally seaward of the 200-mile limit, but also

⁴ Argentina, Australia, Chile, France, East Germany, West Germany, Japan, New Zealand, South Africa, the USSR, the United Kingdom, and the United States. [REDACTED]

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within many of the national fishing and economic zones. All ships of all nations, according to the new UN Law of the Sea Treaty, are allowed full navigational freedom in foreign 200-mile zones as long as they do nothing related to the natural resources therein. Furthermore, the new treaty also stipulates that all ships have the right of innocent passage in foreign territorial seas, the maritime zone that extends as far as 12 miles from shore. The location of the Soviet vessels will shift as new fish resources are discovered and others are depleted, but the fleet will continue to give the USSR a valuable in-place and ostensibly innocent asset that could be used for monitoring foreign activities and for other nonfishing tasks.

The Soviet news agency Novosti recently announced plans by the Ministry of Fisheries for a grand updating of the fleet. The Soviet goal is increased fishing efficiency, and the plans presumably include installation of state-of-the-art fish-finding and communications gear. The modernization will enhance the fleet's capability both to perform its fishing tasks and to persuade developing nations that the USSR has the most advanced fishing technology. Given the opportunities provided by fleet improvement and expansion, the USSR will undoubtedly continue to use its fishing expertise as a tool for penetrating the Third World.

Impact on US Interests

The expanding presence of the USSR's fishing fleet creates pressures on US foreign, strategic, and domestic policy that will require appropriate responses.

These pressures include:

- Increased Soviet penetration of Third World countries through cooperative fishing agreements.
- Increased opportunity to collect intelligence on US and other Western defenses and naval operations, which will to some degree affect the planning and conduct of Western naval operations.
- Increased likelihood of expanded national maritime claims because of uncontrolled Soviet fishing just outside coastal fishing and economic zones, with attendant boundary and jurisdictional conflicts.
- Possible future competition for US tuna fisheries, not only for the tuna but for commercial and political ties with developing nations as well.
- Possible depletion of fish stocks that are unprotected by national or international regulations.

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